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Portrayal of Male characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*

Abstract: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels present a social world of many complex gender relationships. Her novels highlight changes of attitudes, norms and goals set in a cultural background. Initially, the world of literature was dominated by male writers, where women were presented as flat characters. Today women writers are particularly keen in the process of redefining and rediscovering their own roles and position in the society. At the same time the changing perspective of the male characters are also projected. Divakaruni's male characters show a subtle change in their old attitudes, especially the younger generations, who want to empathise with their women counterparts. In spite of all their efforts the male characters are unable to come out of their traditional way of suppressing women. This paper attempts to study

the male characters as depicted in Divakaruni's novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*.

Key words: Male, changing perspectives, tradition, culture

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in 1957 in Calcutta, India. One of her first memories is that of her grandfather telling her the stories from Ramayan and Mahabharath. She finished her schoolings in a convent school. She completed her B.A., degree from the University of Calcutta. At the age of 19, Divakarni moved to the United States for her master's degree. She gained her Ph.D., from the University of California, Berkeley. Divakaruni currently teaches in the nationally ranked Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston.

Divakarni's novels focus on the cultural shift with respect to that of an immigrant experiences. Socially and culturally she positions herself as an immigrant Indian. The young women characters in her novels just adapt or adjust with life around them. Though Divakaruni's novels give much space for women characters, male characters evolve as a catalyst, which play a pivotal role in moving the narration. *Sister of My Heart* is set in Calcutta and opens with the reputed Chatterjee family. The story highlights the coming of age of two young girls Anju and Suda in the Chattarjee family. Chatterjee family is deprived of its male family members. Divakaruni's success is that she makes the reader feel the presence of male characters inspite of their absence.

The very depiction of Bidhata purush, a god according to Bengali tradition, is an ultimate portrayal of power of a male. Bidhata purush depicted as a male holds the power of writing the

fortune of the every person born. Anju and Suda's aunt Pishi believes that the entire life hinges on what the Bidhata Purush writes on their forehead. Divakaruni tries to suggest that men hold the power to control the lives of women. In a metaphorical representation Divakaruni compares Bidhata Purush to the power and supremacy. Whenever Pishi narrates the story of Bidhata Purush, a male supremacy is felt in the narration. In a women centered story, patriarchy is highlighted to show that women though not directly controlled at home, they are controlled by the patriarchal view of the society. "I am washing away everything the Bidhata Purush wrote, for I've had enough of living a life decreed by someone else. How easy it seems!" (*Sister of My Heart*, 249).

Anju and Sudha are deprived from their father's love. They don't have knowledge about any male associations with their family. "Anju and I did not know any young men. We moved in a world of women, my cousin and I, at home and outside". (*Sister of My Heart*, 50). Suresh Kumar, a Ph.D., scholar rightly says, "They live in a patriarchal family where they respect the traditional values. There are no other men in the family; even then they follow all the traditional values since the system of the society made by men, which made up the women's mind in that way." (Kumar, 194) When Anju was asked to write an essay about the effects of culture and heredity upon an individual, she expresses how she was inspired by her mother Gowri Ma, her aunt Pishi and Sudha's mother Nalini. In order to take care of the house and to deal with the loss that Chatterjee family faces, Anju's mother had turned herself into a man. Here Divakaruni opines that a patriarchal society views a male as the head of the family. A man is projected as the breadwinner and the provider of the family. And in the absence of man, woman takes up the role of a man.

Men are portrayed as the protectors of women at every stage of their life. As a small girl, a girl is depended upon her father, and in the middle age, he would be toiling for the goodness of his family. In her precise and scholarly description of the contemporary Indian social scenario, Divakaruni has given expression to the change in the attitudes of Indian men, though not successful to the great extent. Singhji is an important character in the novel, which is an amalgamation of treachery, regret and cowardice.

Gopal, Anju's father and Bijoy, Sudha's father were supposed to be dead at the time of their birth but later it was revealed that Singhji, their chauffeur was Sudha's father. The secret is revealed at the end of the novel through Singhji's letter to Sudha, that in the terrific adventure he mysteriously escaped his death and got his face burnt. His face was completely distorted that nobody recognised him. One day when Chatterjee's were in need of a chauffeur Gopal joined in their household with his new identity, Singhji. The foolishness of Gopal, which resulted in trauma, never let him to reveal his identity. He lived almost the entire life with his family, but he was coward enough to own his wife and daughter. The treacherous plan and his greedy attitude were responsible for the death of Bijoy, but he never spoke the truth as he feared to lose his family again.

Male characters are again and again depicted as the decision makers in the family and in the society. The socio-cultural set-ups in a society are penned according to the whims and fancies of a man. Divakaruni projects the issues related in love and marriages. Anju is married to Sunil, a computer scientist and Sudha is married to Ramesh Sanyal, an officer of the Indian railways and a man not of her choice. Anju silently accepts Sunil after her marriage even after knowing that Sunil was deeply fascinated by Sudha's beauty. Though Sudha loved Ashok before her marriage, she sacrificed her feelings towards Ashok and married Ramesh. Ashok as a man never cared

about the society and his family. But woman like Sudha, who has been brought up in a reputed family sacrificed her love for Ashok. Sudha lived a devoted life in her in-laws house.

Ramesh was always self-sided. Though he never oppressed Sudha directly, he never tried to make Sudha feel comfortable. Sudha's silent nature and her dedication towards her family made Ramesh think that she is comfortable in his house hold. Ramesh's selfish nature resulted in the separation of Sudha and himself. When Sudha's mother-in-law came to know that Sudha has conceived a girl child, she asks Sudha to abort the child. Ramesh too supports her mother. The person one who is in the place to empathise with his wife, has turned against her. Ramesh fails as a father to his unborn child, whereas Sudha who submitted herself wholeheartedly to the service of her husband and his family considered her prior responsibility as a mother. Ramesh turned as a betrayer to his loyal Sudha.

Divakaruni highlights the weak nature of men, when compared to that of women. Sudha boldly walks out from the life of Ramesh, to save her daughter. In fact Sudha is aware of the consequences of her decision. She knows how it is difficult for a woman to survive alone in a male dominated society. She herself had been brought up in a male deprived household. Ramesh remained silent when Sudha left him. He neither supported nor objected to his mother's decision. The boldness of Ramesh is in fact his supremacy as a male, which he proved within few days by marrying another girl. In the social context it was not Ramesh but Sudha who became the target of humiliation and dejection.

Sunil's father is portrayed as a man of authority and oppression. Anju uses the word 'Tyrant' to describe her father-in-law. Divakaruni typically pinpoints the male chauvinistic Indian society in Sunil's father. Anju feels sorry for the deprived condition of her mother-in-law. Anju's mother-in-law is a kind and caring woman. She is highly dominated by her husband who

keep on insisting to follow his instructions regarding food preparations and other family matters. Once Anju's father-in-law reacted cruelly on the dining table, throwing the bowl of chutney at her mother-in-law. Anju thinks whether is it the economic dependency which renders her mother-in-law to remain silent or is it the pressure of the society which doesn't allow women to speak. Divakaruni projects two different shades of male characters, one is silent and assertive Ramesh and the other is tyrant and oppressive Anju's father-in-law. In both cases, either by silence or by brutality men wants to make women inferior to them. Shubhra Tiwari and A.A.Khan opine that:

Differences in gender roles and behaviors often create inequalities, whereby one gender becomes empowered to the disadvantage of the other. Thus, in many societies, women are viewed as subordinate to men and have a lower social status, allowing men control over, and greater decision-making power than, women.

Inequality in gender leads to violence by men against women. (Tiwari, 72).

A shift in the patriarchal thinking is expressed in the characters of Ashok and Sunil. Sunil is shown on sensitive grounds as Indian male character. Sunil is also seen empathizing with his female counterparts. Divakaruni depicts both old and new generations through Sunil and his father. Sunil is seen adopting new culture as an immigrant in America. America endowed him with light-heartedness and ease. Though not in a complete way, Sunil extends his support to Anju in every possible manner. Ashok is seen waiting for Sudha throughout the novel. Ashok stands out in a male chauvinistic society when he offers himself in marrying destitute Sudha. Ashok never cared for the stigmas related to the society. Sunil understands the injustices that happen to Sudha. Sunil's stand is conservative, though he is westernized. His American outlook

subdues his Indian male attitude. Sujatha Girish and Payal Dutta Chaudhury comments on Sunil as:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni depicts a few of her male characters from the select novels in a delightfully different light which is quiet refreshing. These men fascinate us as they are not stereotypical. Sunil is a significant character who is painted in a way by Divakaruni which deviates from the stereotypical image of an Indian male ... Unlike his father who proves to be a dominant patriarch in every sense, Sunil is a considerate son and a caring husband. (Girish)

In spite of all the efforts made by Sunil to make Anju comfortable, he fails in his attempts to present himself convincingly with his weaknesses. Though Sunil is not oppressive, Anju senses a typical Indian male in him, “ ... so once or twice I offered to take up a job. But he got all huffy and said he’s quite capable of feeding his wife, thank you. If that isn’t a typical Indian male!” (*Sister of My Heart*, 266). Anju could even sense her husband’s inclination towards Sudha, “ Why are you being so obsessively patriarchal?” (*The Vine of Desire*, 158). On one end Sunil is shown as a man of progressive thinking and in another end he sticks to his patriarchal Indian thinking.

Conclusion

Divakaruni’s both the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* is of course presented in woman’s standpoint. In these novels she portrays the transition of both older and younger generations. Divakaruni’s women characters fight and overcome the predominance of male. Male characters are presented through the prism of her women characters. Divakaruni indirectly emphasizes the indispensability of men in the society. Chatterjee family has to face lot

of hardships due to the absence of male relatives. At the same time Divakaruni backlashes the Indian patriarchal view. Men from younger generation extend their helping hands to their women, but are not successful to a greater extent. These works attempt to change the age old tradition of female virtue, which is defined by men and so it is more favourable to them. Men decide the societal, cultural and psychological patterns of the society. This brings pressures in familial relationships and causes emotional stress in women's life.

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